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ABSTRACT

Intertextuality is a term that is defined variously and, in a sense, cannot be defined categorically and should not be. The term serves as a point of departure for engaging in an academic discourse grounded in differing theoretical and institutional frames. In the wake of poststructuralism, the classical notion of a "definition," a bringing together of scattered particulars, no longer holds together. Though initially defined by Julia Kristeva as a process of constructing a text through selection and inclusion, "intertextuality" has been appropriated by scholars in composition. Using the term to support an expressivist approach, Nancy Kline encourages her students to engage with the "presence" in the text, which in turn is engaged with other presences. James Porter uses the term to counter romantic notions of the writer as an autonomous, creative agent, like E. G. White or Joan Didion. Paul Hunter uses the term to sidestep the problematics of "intersubjectivism," the interpersonal interaction that the discourse community theory assumes; he believes the intertextual matrix is much larger than that given discourse communities. Rather than attempting to measure these theories against some primary source to determine which one qualifies as a misreading, the scholar should, according to Richard Rorty's pragmatism, accept or reject them according to their usefulness. Rorty argues that "definitions" should not be forgotten but should be done without to the extent that it is possible. (TB)

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Keywords in Composition Studies: Intertextuality

In the Phaedrus, Socrates elevates to the divine the matter of definition--what he calls "perceiving and bringing together in one idea the scattered particulars": "[I]f I think any other man is able to see things that can naturally be collected into one . . . him I follow after and "walk in his footsteps as if he were a god." According to Plato, the virtues of "clearness and consistency" are achieved by any discourse that begins with definition, the dialectician's first order of business. It was a message not lost on Aristotle, who not only stressed the value of definition in his Rhetoric but made it--along with the mechanism of division--his very organizing principle. Judging from an examination of any freshman argumentation textbook, the matter of "defining one's terms" is as important to effective, "real world" persuasion today as it was 2500 years ago.

At least since Nietzsche, however, definition has been losing its theoretical defensibility. What we sometimes want to call the "Modern Rhetorical Tradition" has been marked by a series of reminders that "clearness and consistency" are secured not by a divine sort of illumination, but through a process of forgetting, neglecting, denying. "[A] word becomes a concept," Nietzsche suggests,

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> insofar as it simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases[,] . . . cases which are never equal and [are] thus altogether unequal. . . . Just as it is certain that one leaf is never totally the same as another, so it is certain that the concept "leaf" is formed by arbitrarily discarding these individual differences and by forgetting the distinguishing aspects. (891)

Derrida's deconstruction of the "metaphysics of presence," among other things, makes a casualty of definition. We might achieve confidence in "clarity and consistency" by blinding ourselves, by deferring the chain of differences or traces marked by every term. Foucault cautions that definition does not occur in a vacuum, that meaning is constituted through "relations" between institutional systems, processes, and modes, and that "these relations are not present in the object." And what about Perelman's assertion that **definition** is no more than a rhetorical figure? Definitions, he suggests, "are mostly abbreviations" that "aim, not at clarifying the meaning of an idea, but at stressing aspects that will produce [a] persuasive effect." Burke, in his explanation of "terministic screens," claims that any given term can be only a selection of reality and, therefore, must necessarily be a deflection of reality. And consider I. A. Richards' attempt, in his words, to "discourage [the] habit of behaving as though, if a passage means one thing it cannot at the same time mean another and an incompatible thing." Finally--

"finally" only because external constraints prevent the possibility of an endless reverberation here--I might also invoke Bakhtin, who can be remarkably succinct: "Multiplicity of meaning," he wrote, "is the constitutive feature of word."

If my citation of all of these sources seems exceedingly tedious, there may be any number of explanations. But some of you, no doubt, would simply like a kind of marker for all that has been said against definition, a term that might gather together the scattered particulars about scattered particulars; after all, aren't Bakhtin, Richards, Foucault, Derrida, Burke, and Nietzsche "saying the same thing"?

Well, if we agree with any one of them, the answer must be **no**. Yet they seem to be saying the same thing; there is no question that segments of texts they've written can be arranged so that they can be understood to say the same thing. Indeed, when these segments are arranged in the way I've arranged them here, these theorists seem to have few interests outside of my own. Following Julia Kristeva, we can call this process intertextuality: every text, such as the one I'm reading today, is constructed from fragments of other texts in a process of selection and inclusion. No text, such as Bakhtin's The Problem of Speech Genres for example, can determine its range of signification, its "influence," its meaning. It absorbs other texts and replies to them; it, in turn, cannot avoid this absorption and reply. In Kristeva's terms, no text can ever be circumscribed, can ever contain its dissemination, can ever halt

the "endlessly expanding context of intertextuality" (Clayton and Rothstein 19).

But Kristeva presses on, suggesting that intertextuality functions not only at the level of text, but at the level of word. "[E]ach word," she claims, "is an intersection of words where at least one other word can be read" (Desire 66). Thus we arrive at the paradox of **intertextuality**. It is a single word, a term, that we can take to "stand for," to "mean," to "signify"--among other things--the undecidability inherent in any given term. To know what the term intertextuality "means" is to recover the scattered particulars that allowed the concept to emerge; to use the term "meaningfully" is to repress them. The project of "defining" intertextuality in the conventional sense, to paraphrase Richard Rorty, brings back just the idea we want to get rid of.

"We need to get off this seesaw," Rorty suggests in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (11). Riding the seesaw is, for Rorty, a metaphor for going nowhere, for doing nothing and for getting nothing done. Fine for play, unfit for purpose. We're perhaps not at the point, perhaps never should be at the point, where we can sidestep the seesaw altogether and risk forgetting the forgetting that makes definitions comfortable. But we perhaps are at the point where we can try on Rorty's pragmatism in composition studies, the point where we can stop asking questions about truths, or essences, or origins, the point

where we can, as Rorty suggests, "in fact say little about these topics, and see how we get on" (8). A pragmatic analysis of the use of the term intertextuality, then, might simply trace its appearance within a given institutional arrangement--composition studies--and contextualize both the arguments it has been used to advance and their responses. To examine, in Rorty's terms, the "relative profitability" of intertextuality as a lexical "tool."

Like most other theoretical systems at work in composition studies, intertextuality is an "import." It was authorized, legitimized, in some other discursive arrangement, under different discursive protocol, conforming to distinct discursive or methodological conventions, for other purposes. (In Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History, Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein construct a context to explain Kristeva's coining of the term.) Those institutionally situated in composition studies have appropriated such theories and ideas and have, quite simply, shaped them for their needs. John Shilb uses the phrase "travelling theory" to explain how a body of ideas metamorphoses as it permeates discursive boundaries. As Linda H. Peterson has said of deconstruction, often these theories are used as powerful reinforcements in battles they were never meant to fight. One might say that in this way composition studies itself functions as what Kristeva calls an "intersection of textual surfaces . . . as a dialogue among several writings" (Desire 65, italics in original). Tim Crusius, I am told, just calls this composition's "shopping cart approach" to research.

At any rate, we should not be at all surprised to find that intertextuality is understood in different ways and is used to support oppositional positions. I'll explain using three texts that make some conception of intertextuality central to their arguments: Nancy Kline's "Intertextual Trips: Teaching the Essay in the Composition Class"; James Porter's "Intertextuality and the Discourse Community"; and Paul Hunter's "Intertextual Knowledge: A New Look at Rhetoric-as-Epistemic."

The central question governing Nancy Kline's pedagogy is this: "How do we begin to get our students to dare to play, to speak, in their own prose?" (25) Supporting a conception of the Montaignian or exploratory essay, Kline encourages students to think of "writing as exploration," to "write to find out what [they're] thinking" (19). To facilitate such an approach, Kline asks her students to read, in her words, "professional essays" that are intertextual--that respond to or somehow incorporate other texts--and that "approach their own page as an experimental, playful space." Examples are John Berryman's analysis of Crane's "The Open Boat" and King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Each, she says, "establishes its own voice" and "each is a kind of dialogue" (16).

"What I want to teach my students," Kline writes, is that "there's a person speaking to us in the pages we have read . . . a human presence at play in the page" (37). By reading the professional essays, students will become aware of and perhaps go on to mimic a relationship between their own texts and others

they have read in what Kline calls "intertextual play." As an example of the "play" she has in mind, Kline suggests that when writing about Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"--which has as its central object a quilt--students "may find themselves talking about the **fabric** of the story, the **interweaving** of its separate pieces, the author's **patchwork** technique" (23, my emphasis). Students, she suggests, "possess worlds of their own that may fruitfully be brought to bear on what they are reading and writing, worlds that most certainly influence the timbre of their own voices" (30). In closing, she firmly underscores Joan Didion's dictum that "Writing is the act of saying I" (36).

Intertextuality, then, can function as a kind of backing for what we've come to label an expressivist pedagogy. But wait! James Porter claims

> Intertextuality counters . . . one prevailing composition pedagogy, one favoring a romantic image of the writer, offering as role models the creative essayists, the Sunday Supplement freelancers, the Joan Didions, E. B. Whites . . . . Our anthologies glorify the individual essayist . . . . an autonomous writer exercising a free, creative will through the writing act . . . . we romanticize composition by overemphasizing the autonomy of the writer. (41)

Understanding what he calls the "intertext" as something of a synonym for "discourse community," Porter stresses that "authorial intention is less significant than social context

. . . . the intertext constrains writing" (35). Rejecting out of hand the very possibility of an "individual voice," Porter argues that

> [i]ntertextuality suggests that our goal should be to help students learn to write for the discourse communities they choose to join. . . . Our immediate goal is to produce socialized writers . . . . Intertextual theory suggests that the key criteria for evaluating writing should be 'acceptability' within some discourse community. (42-43)

Neatly defining the discourse community or "intertext" as a "group of individuals bound by a common interest" (38), Porter goes on to offer what he calls a "forum analysis," a heuristic designed to help students identify a given community's "discourse values."

If we had no trouble finding a text (Porter's) that constructed a pedagogy based on intertextuality to counter a pedagogy based on intertextuality (Kline's), should we have trouble finding a text using intertextuality to counter Porter's? Paul Hunter begins this way: "I want to reject the model of 'discourse community' as . . . 'the relevant qualified men and women' and replace it with a model that sees a discourse community primarily as texts, not people" (3).

According to Hunter, intertextuality provides a way to sidestep the problematics of what he calls "intersubjectivism," the interpersonal interaction that discourse community theory

assumes. Citing Paul Ricoeur, Hunter celebrates the "semantic autonomy" of the text, whose "career escapes the finite horizons lived by its author" (7) and, presumably, her "discourse community." Seeming much more like Kristeva than Porter, Hunter argues that the "intertextual matrix" is much larger than any given discourse community. Rather than adhering to boundaries for acceptance, a text, he claims, must "be as free from boundaries and limitations as possible." The very purpose of writing, Hunter claims, "is to create revolutionary discourse, to deconstruct the boundaries imposed on texts" (9).

We might be sorely tempted to begin weighing Kline, Porter, and Hunter against what have been called "primary" sources for intertextuality. We might suggest that one or all of them had somehow "misread" Kristeva, say, or Roland Barthes. That, without question, would put us back on the seesaw. As Rorty points out, even if we choose to examine competing ideas or interpretations within a particular community of discourse, "it is difficult to think of the world as making one of these better than another, of the world as deciding between them" (5).

Can intertextuality provide a way to reconcile these competing claims about intertextuality? If we accept Leonard Orr's assertion that "[i]n any intertextual chain . . . a textual distortion takes place" (817), we can absolve each of these authors of interpretive failure. We could set aside questions of the play (the slippage) of language asking, as Rorty might have

us ask, which of these texts is most useful? Which best serves our purposes? Which will allow us to get something done? We can take it as a given that ideological perspectives--constrained or constructed by community or not--are at work sifting through texts, picking and choosing, foregrounding and forgetting. We can take intertextuality to be the very confrontation between discourse grounded in differing theoretical or institutional frames, a confrontation that continually transforms or refigures the relationships between these frames (Orr 814). There might be a site for composition studies: off of the seesaw, if never out of its shadow.

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